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BRIEFING NOTE

Qualifications frameworks: expanding influence, persisting obstacles

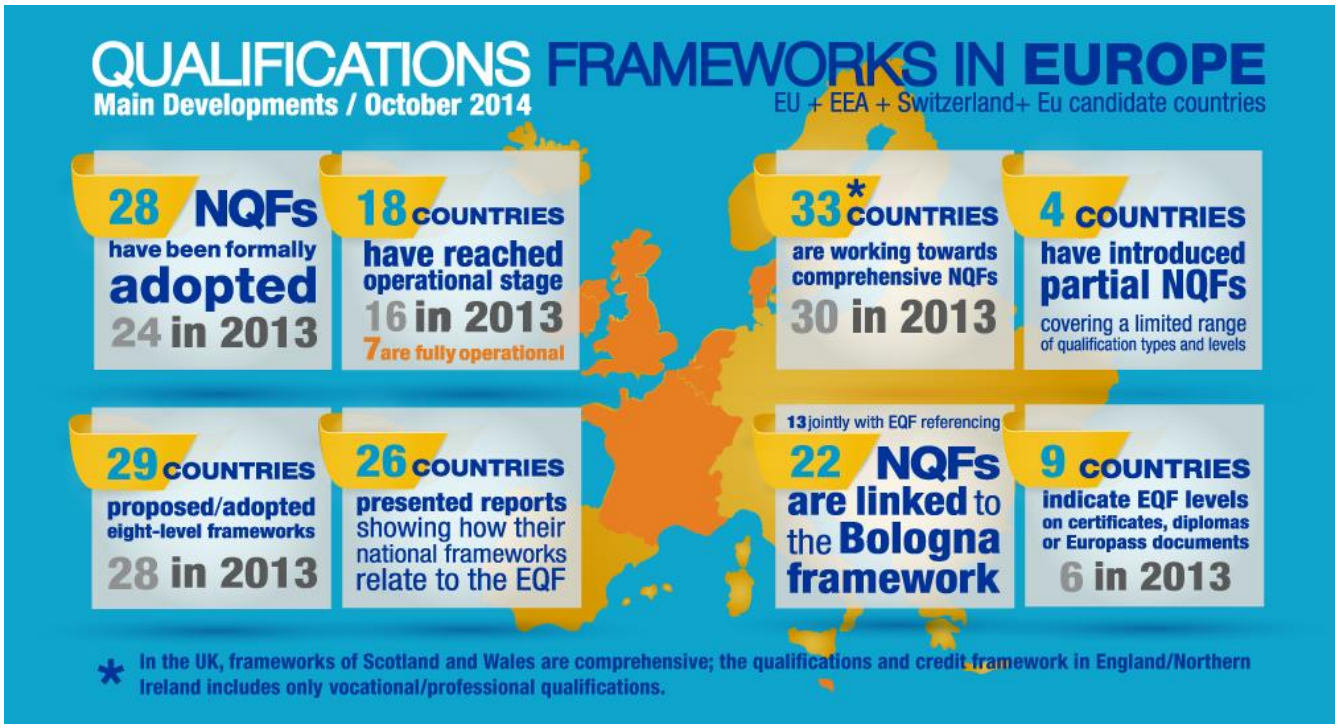
Initial work on the European qualifications framework (EQF) started 10 years ago, in autumn 2004. Partly triggered by this initiative, qualifications frameworks have since become integral parts of almost all education and training systems in Europe. Outside Europe, more and more countries and regions (such as Asia-Pacific) are rapidly developing and implementing qualifications frameworks.

Over this period, Cedefop has been systematically mapping and analysing emergence of qualifications frameworks in different settings and for different purposes.

Implementing NQFs – Challenges

A country can implement an NQFwithout a legal framework and by consensus, but for full implementation and national legitimacy a legal framework may be necessary. The legal process takes somewhat different forms in different countries: some countries choose to amend existing laws while others introduce new laws. By October 2014, 28 frameworks had clarified their legal basis, the most recent being Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Romania and Switzerland. Currently, Belgium (FR), Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Turkey are preparing for formal adoption. Finland advanced rapidly in earlier years; its case shows, however, that introducing an NQF is not just a technical process but also requires political support.

For a framework to become operational, all procedures and criteria have to be in place. These include assigning qualifications to levels, full implementation of quality assurance arrangements, and integrating external, private and validation-based qualifications. Some countries are currently putting these final arrangements in place and have thus reached an early operational stage: Belgium (DE), Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Norway, and Portugal.



To reach full operational stage, the most critical requirement is implementation of the learning outcomes approach. For many countries, this entails extensive discussions on the links between different qualifications and their relative value. More and more countries now refer to NQF levels when developing qualifications standards. They also use learning outcomes-based levels to strengthen consistency between qualifications and institutions. To release their full potential, NQFs should be an integral part of education, training and employment policies. NQF implementation must also adopt a long- term perspective.

NQFs are intended to increase transparency, and this requires them to be visible and predictable. England provides a counterexample of a country where a multitude of changing qualification frameworks may be said to reduce transparency.

Box 1. **Awareness among learners – SCQF**

In 2013 an independent evaluation examined awareness level, perception and understanding of the Scottish credit and qualifications framework among learners, parents, teaching staff and school management ([1]). This evaluation gives a valuable insight into the level of implementation of the framework. These are the main findings it reported for learners:

- 53% of all learners reported they are aware of the SCQF. Levels of knowledge varied between different parts of education with the highest levels found in schools (63%).
- Learners aware of the framework (66%) have a reasonable understanding of its principles and purposes. They are aware of levels and credit points, and of how the framework presents progression and transition throughout education and training.
- Half the learners aware of the framework have used it. Those most likely to have done so are learners in schools; the framework supports them in planning future education and training.

NQFs and end-users

NQFs can only become fully operational if end-users – learners, parents, teachers, and guidance and counselling practitioners – are aware of them. Most countries with recent NQFs have not yet achieved this awareness. Mature frameworks, however, such as the Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF) show a high level of awareness among users (see Box 1).

Including NQF and EQF levels in certificates and diplomas, as well as in qualifications databases, may be critical for increasing awareness of individual learners and other end-users. Countries like the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, France, Germany, Lithuania, Malta and Portugal have made progress in this area. In England and Northern Ireland, where awarding bodies are free to decide whether to refer to the corresponding EQF levels or not, progress has been slower.

For an NQF to be visible, and thus help learners plan their education and training careers, its levels must be used as a reference point at all stages and for a wide range of purposes: qualification databases should reflect framework levels; standards and programmes should also refer to levels; counsellors should use the framework as a tool and it should be possible for outcomes of education and training to be identified by NQF (and EQF) level.

NQFs and validation

A close link between NQFs and arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning makes NQFs more relevant to individual learners. To create this link, the same learning outcomes-based standards must be used to evaluate all forms of learning. While a few countries, such as France, fully integrate validation into their national qualification systems, many others have yet to establish a clear link. Based on data from the 2014 European inventory on validation of informal and non-formal learning ([2]), half the countries covered (16) report that discussions are underway on how to connect NQFs with validation. Another 20 maintain they have already established this link, at least partially or for specific qualifications. Follow-up to the 2012 Council recommendation on

([1]) http://scqf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Ashbrook-Report-Key-Findings-Learners-Teaching-Staff-July-2013.pdf

([2]) European Commission et al., 2014. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory

validation, which sets 2018 as a target date, may contribute to strengthening this link.

NQFs and the labour market

Most NQFs take as their point of departure qualifications regulated and awarded by national authorities (for example Education and Training Ministries). In recent years, countries have paid more attention to so-called external qualifications, awarded by the non-formal and private sector. Opening up frameworks to include such qualifications not only increases overall transparency but also strengthens the links between initial education and training, predominantly provided by the public sector, and continuing training offered by other providers and companies. Nevertheless, maintaining trust in the overall system requires adequate quality assurance. Among other countries Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden have adopted or are working toward quality assurance criteria that cover both external qualifications themselves and bodies awarding them. The Netherlands made significant progress in 2012-14: several qualifications awarded by private providers are now formally included in the Dutch framework. Future success of NQFs will largely depend on whether the frameworks will be seen as relevant outside formal public education and training.

Achieved learning outcomes

Learning outcomes-based NQF levels contribute to transparency by clarifying what is expected from a holder of a qualification. However, these intended learning outcomes are not enough to generate trust in qualifications: achieved learning outcomes also matter. The recently published PIAAC survey ([3]) shows that education and training operating at the same level of intended learning outcomes may well differ in the actual learning outcomes achieved. In further developing NQFs and cooperating in relation to the EQF, countries should seek to address this discrepancy.

The European qualifications framework – Progress to date

From September 2009 to November 2014, 26 countries presented referencing reports showing how their national frameworks relate to the EQF, and the rest are expected to follow in 2015, signalling that the first stage of the EQF referencing process is reaching completion. Despite the delay relative to the original targets of the EQF recommendation, the process has been generally successful: all countries are actively seeking to meet the targets expressed in the EQF recommendation and the requirements outlined in the criteria underpinning the referencing process.

Information gathered through referencing also contributes directly to greater transparency of qualifications at national and European levels. Referencing reports ([4]) cover all levels and types of national qualifications, in the national language as well as in English. For many countries, this information did not exist prior to the EQF. The common approach triggered by 10 referencing criteria and procedures ([5]) simplifies comparisons across countries.

The working methods developed by the EQF advisory group also contribute to increase common trust. Members act as 'critical friends', acknowledging that overall success of the EQF depends on transparency and willingness to give as well as receive constructive feedback.

Challenges, however, remain. For instance, national reports generally do not provide information on how decisions to attribute levels to qualifications or qualification types have been reached. Moreover, it is sometimes unclear which qualifications are included or not in an NQF, because legal or political decisions may be pending or because the right format for presenting this information is missing. In many cases, referencing reports fail to describe how different aspects of referencing are related to one another – for example, whether and how quality assurance allows for a shift to a learning outcomes approach and to establish levels of qualifications. Discussing these issues in isolation from one another means

([3]) http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/#d.en.221854

([4]) https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/documentation

([5]) https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/criteria_en.pdf

information is not presented coherently and transparency may be compromised.

Referencing reports must also be continually updated. For instance, Malta has had two updates since publishing its first report in 2009; Estonia and Belgium-Flanders are also preparing updated reports. EQF credibility rests on regularly updated information registering all changes to the framework and the qualifications it covers.

Global dimension of qualification frameworks

The global inventory of national qualifications frameworks, published jointly by Cedefop, ETF and Unesco in 2013/14 ([6]), covers more than 140 frameworks. Most were developed and introduced in the past decade. While these frameworks mainly have a national role, NQFs are being increasingly used to strengthen cooperation between countries and regions.

In 2012, Ireland and New Zealand agreed to align their NQFs. This agreement clarifies the relationship between levels of the two frameworks and eases mutual recognition between the two countries. New Zealand is currently seeking to expand this approach to Malaysia and Scotland.

While some countries pursue a direct link of their NQFs, an alternative is implementing regional frameworks like the EQF and the Asia-Pacific (ASEAN) framework (from 1 January 2015). Seeking to strengthen cooperation, in 2014, the EQF advisory group entered into discussions with Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong. A technical alignment of these three NQFs to the EQF is expected to be carried out in 2015, promoting common recognition. Several other non-European countries have also signalled interest in linking up to the EQF, although timing has yet to be decided. These discussions illustrate the extent to which qualifications frameworks can be used as instruments for policy cooperation.

Unesco, too, recognises that qualifications frameworks can help to promote international cooperation on qualifications. Reflecting a decision in the 2012 Shanghai Global Forum on TVET, Unesco has been investigating technical and conceptual feasibility of world reference levels for qualifications since 2013. This work takes as its starting point progress achieved in implementing national and regional qualifications frameworks, and asks whether a set of common reference levels could help cooperation and common understanding.

For the time being, qualifications frameworks play a modest role in increasing transparency and promoting common recognition. The approaches listed here, however, show that this role is growing in importance.

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([6]) http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/21958.aspx